

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11
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R 191701Z MAY 78
FM AMEMBASSY GEORGETOWN
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6825
INFO AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN
AMEMBASSY KINGSTON
AMEMBASSY PORT OF SPAIN
AMEMBASSY PARAMARIBO

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT, ELAB, GY
SUBJECT: REFERENDUM BILL PASSES

REF: A. GEORGETOWN 1535, B. GEORGETOWN 1560, C. GEORGETOWN 1595
(NOTAL)

1. AFTER SEVEN HOURS OF DEBATE, ON MAY 17 THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY PASSED THE REFERENDUM BILL (REF A). MEMBERS OF THE TWO OPPOSITION PARTIES WORE BLACK ARMBANDS DURING THE SESSION TO SYMBOLIZE THEIR MOURNING FOR "THE DEATH OF DEMOCRACY." DURING THE DEBATE, OPPOSITION SPOKESMAN CHARGED THAT THE BILL WAS ONLY A CLEVER MANEUVER TO POSTPONE INDEFINITELY GENERAL ELECTIONS, WHICH UNDER THE PRESENT CONSTITUTION ARE REQUIRED BY OCTOBER 25. THE OPPOSITION ALSO CHARGED THAT THE RULING PEOPLE'S NATIONAL CONGRESS (PNC), WHICH ENJOYS A TWO-THIRDS MAJORITY IN THE ASSEMBLY, WOULD "RIG" THE NATIONAL REFERENDUM. THIS WOULD ALLOW THE PNC TO AMEND THE CONSTITUTION AT WILL AND POSTPONE ELECTIONS INDEFINITELY.

2. ATTORNEY GENERAL AND MINISTER OF JUSTICE MOHAMED
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SHAHABUDDEEN, WHO WAS THE CHIEF GOVERNMENT SPOKESMAN FOR THE BILL, ARGUED THAT IT WAS POINTLESS TO HOLD GENERAL ELECTIONS UNDER THE PRESENT CONSTITUTION IF A NEW ONE WAS SOON TO BE DRAFTED. THE PASSAGE OF THE REFERENDUM WOULD PROVIDE THE NECESSARY MANDATE FOR THE PRESENT ASSEMBLY BY A SIMPLE RESOLUTION TO DISSOLVE ITSELF INTO THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY (REF B). HE REFUTED CHARGES OF IRREGULARITIES IN PREVIOUS

ELECTIONS BY POINTING OUT THAT NO PETITIONS ON THE MATTER HAD EVER BEEN SUBMITTED TO THE COURTS. (COMMENT: UNDER THE PROCEDURES ESTABLISHED IN THE REFERENDUM BILL, COURT CHALLENGES OF THE REFERENDUM WILL NOT BE ALLOWED. THE ATTORNEY GENERAL EXPLAINED DURING THE DEBATE THAT THE PRESENT CONSTITUTION ONLY ALLOWS FOR SUCH CHALLENGES IN THE CASE OF GENERAL ELECTIONS, AND, IN GENERAL, A REFERENDUM IS A POLITICAL ACT NOT SUBJECT TO JUSTICIABLE PROCEDURES. END COMMENT.)

3. DURING THE DEBATE APPROXIMATELY ONE HUNDRED PRO-GOVERNMENT DEMONSTRATORS CARRIED PLACARDS OUTSIDE OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY IN FAVOR OF THE BILL. ABOUT THIRTY OPPOSITION DEMONSTRATORS WERE ROUGHED UP AND HAD THEIR PLACARDS TAKEN AWAY FROM THEM BY PRO-GOVERNMENT DEMONSTRATORS. THERE WERE NO ARRESTS BY THE POLICE AS A RESULT OF THE SCUFFLES. VOILENCE ALSO OCCURRED DURING A POLITICAL RALLY BY THE OPPOSITION IN ANOTHER PART OF THE CAPITAL (REF C).

4. THE OPPOSITION-AFFILIATED GUYANA AGRICULTURAL AND GENERAL WORKERS UNION (GAWU) HELD A ONE-DAY STRIKE ON MAY 17 TO PROTEST THE BILL. THE TRADE UNION COUNCIL (TUC), OF WHICH GAWU IS A PART, HAS NOT TAKEN AN OFFICIAL STAND ON THE REFERENDUM. HOWEVER, TUC GENERAL SECRETARY JOSEPH POLLYDORE INFORMED EMBOFF THAT HE DISAGREES WITH THE GOVERNMENT'S CONTENTION THAT GENERAL ELECTIONS SHOULD BE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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POSTPONED, AND ALSO STATED THAT A TUC CONFERENCE WILL CONSIDER THE QUESTION BEFORE THE REFERENDUM IS HELD.

5. COMMENT: THE FACT THAT THE GOVERNMENT IS ATTEMPTING THROUGH THE DEVICE OF THE REFERENDUM TO POSTPONE ELECTIONS IS A PARTICULARLY SENSITIVE ISSUE. THIS POLITICAL MANEUVER COMING ON THE HEELS OF SEVERAL MONTHS OF SEVERE SHORTAGES OF FOODSTUFFS AND OTHER ESSENTIAL COMMODITIES, POWER AND WATER FAILURES AND A SEVERELY DEPRESSED ECONOMY HAS PRODUCED A POTENTIALLY VOLATILE SITUATION. WHAT REMAINS TO BE SEEN IS WHAT FORM THIS POPULAR DISSATISFACTION WILL TAKE IN THE COMING WEEKS.
BURKE

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